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**Give it to Your Damn Selves: Exploring Black Feminist Humor and
Thought**

by

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Thought**

**Approved by
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Dedication

For my lifelines, Banana and Mama.

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Abstract

Give it to Your Damn Selves: Exploring Black Feminist Humor and Thought

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This thesis focuses on the use of feminist humor as a method of coalition building among African American women. It is motivated by the central question: what are the ways in which comedic performances may act as both a rebellious counter to dominant views of women of color in the United States and a way to articulate feminist ideologies? More specifically, I am interested in how African American women utilize comedy to articulate specific standpoints and build solidarity. As comedy is often used to persuade and perhaps bond audiences, it is important to continue research in the rhetoric of humor—especially that which takes into account comedy that challenges hegemonic systems and builds cohesion among oppressed groups. I wish to address ways in which theories of humor may work to include not only feminist modes comedy, but

performances that also address the intersections of oppressions—including race, class, sexuality, etc. I will be examining the 2001 film *The Queens of Comedy* starring standup comedians Laura Hayes, Adele Givens, Sommore, and Mo’Nique. A follow-up on the 2000 movie and live standup tour *The Original Kings of Comedy*, the film depicts the four women’s comedic routines at the Orpheum Theatre in front of a predominately Black and predominately female audience. I argue that the Queens’ use of humor acts as a method to articulate intersections of oppression from a Black female perspective. This creates a specific counterpublic space, defies dominant views of Black American women and fosters cohesion among sympathetic audiences. The first chapter works towards a theory of feminist humor—one that builds off of current comedy research by integrating radical feminist thought (mostly that of Black feminisms). Chapter two identifies anti-feminist dimensions of the Queens’ performances in order to understand unsuccessful (and perhaps harmful) methods of rhetorical humor. Chapter three closely examines dimensions of the Queens’ performances that articulate Black feminist thought and how those performances encourage coalition building among Black women. Chapter four will draw critical implications and address concerns for those interested in humor as a method of encouraging social stability and change.

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CHAPTER ONE: TOWARDS A FEMINIST HUMOR

Introduction

Is the subject of jokes worth so much trouble? There can, I think, be no doubt of it. –Sigmund Freud, 1960

Black feminist Florence Kennedy once quipped, “I’m just a loud-mouthed middle-aged colored lady...and a lot of people think I’m crazy. Maybe you do too, but I never stop to wonder why I’m not like other people. The mystery to me is why more people aren’t like me” (Kennedy as cited in Barreca, 1996, p. 304). This one-liner, depicted in Regina Barreca’s collection of women humorists, gives the reader insight into the ways in which humor may inform and articulate one’s identity. More specifically, Kennedy’s comedy expresses the intersections of race and gender in an accessible, entertaining manner, and perhaps raises an audience’s consciousness through performative acts. “Questioning one’s circumstances is a rebellious posture. To refuse to see the humor in one’s own victimization as the butt of the joke or the object of ridicule while seizing and redefining the apparatus of comic perspective so that it is inclusive of women’s experience is a necessary and powerful gesture of self-definition” (Merrill, 1988, p. 280).

Apte (as cited in Miczo and Welter, 2006) claims that a sense of humor is a core cultural American value as it allows groups of otherwise unlikely people to come together simply through laughter. As such, humorous forms of communication, while wide in variety and notions of effectiveness, are considered to be powerful rhetorical tools. Further, humor that is utilized by marginalized groups has the “ability to challenge

dominant ideological discourse and by association, the power structure that discourse supports without openly confronting them” (Gillooly, 1991). Through examining the rhetoric of humor, we may become more apt to recognize the ways in which comedic performances demonstrate the power to uphold or dismantle apparatuses of oppression. With this, critics will be better equipped to understand the ways in which performative outlets may divide or unite groups through theatrical and vernacular rhetorics. It is my belief that humor may be used in such a way that it “scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include and empower minority identities and identifications” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 31).

The quotation at the start of this introduction from Freud suggests the high stakes involved in joke telling and listening. Because of its role in social stability and change, it is important to continue research in the rhetoric of humor—especially that which takes into account comedy that challenges dominant ideologies and builds cohesion among oppressed groups. Specifically, I am interested in the ways in which theories of humor may work to include not only feminist modes comedy, but performances that also address the intersections of oppressions—including race, class, sexuality, etc. While communication scholars have investigated the effectiveness of humor as a communicative and rhetorical outlet, theories that centralize on women of color utilizing joke telling to build solidarity is certainly lacking in the field of rhetorical studies. In this context, solidarity may be achieved “in terms of mutuality, accountability and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice

of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together.” (Mohonty, p. 7, 2006).

This thesis is motivated by the central question: what are the ways in which comedic performances may act as both rebellious counters to dominant views of women of color in the United States, and outlets for coalition building? More specifically, I am interested how African American women utilize comedy to articulate specific standpoints as both women and people of color. As Merrill (1988) posits, it is important to examine feminists’ use of humor (and in this case, Black feminists’ use of humor) because

Comedy is both an aggressive and intellectual response to human nature and experience. A cognizance of women’s right to be both aggressive and intellectual is a relatively new historical phenomenon. What is even more recent and radical though, about feminist humor is that it addresses itself to women and to the multiplicity of experiences and values women embody. (p. 278)

In the coming chapters, I will be examining the 2001 film *The Queens of Comedy* starring stand-up comedians Laura Hayes, Adele Givens, Sommore, and Mo’Nique. A follow-up on the 2000 movie and live stand-up tour *The Original Kings of Comedy*, the film depicts the four women’s comedic routines at the Orpheum Theatre in front of a predominately Black and predominately female audience. Within their performative style, a much deep communicative message surfaces: a celebration of womanhood, and perhaps most importantly a celebration of Black womanhood, depicted through comedy. In spite of the self-selecting audience (the film is now only available on DVD), narrative rife with empowering messages to women of color will perhaps demonstrate the larger role comedy can play as an approach to feminist rhetorical strategy. I argue and later articulate that the Queens’ use of humor acts as a method to articulate intersections of oppression from a Black female perspective. This creates a specific counterpublic space,

defies dominant views of Black American women and fosters cohesion among sympathetic audiences. While normative comedic strategies require a certain level of aggression on the part of the joke-teller, the Queens' use of humor, although assertive and brass, works to create a space in which the audience and performer become a community—rejecting hegemonic notions of femininity through playful, yet powerful comedic performances. I will be examining specific instances in which these comedians use the stage to empower and unite women in the audience.

“Theorizing black experience in the United States is a difficult task. Socialized within white supremacist educational systems and by a racist mass media, many black people are convinced that our lives are not complex, and therefore unworthy of sophisticated critical analysis and reflection” (hooks, 1992, p. 2). This strategic use of humor allows the women to explain and relate their experiences in an empowering manner. “For Black women...it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others...The development of the self-defined Black woman, ready to explore and pursue our power and interests within our communities is a vital component for Black liberation” (Lorde, 2007, p. 46). Their humor, articulated through a specific Black feminist lens creates what Collins calls *oppositional knowledge*. Oppositional knowledge is “a type of knowledge developed by, for, and/or in defense of an oppressed group’s interest (1998, p. 279).

“Western social thought associates Blackness with an imagined uncivilized, wild sexuality and uses this association as one lynchpin of racial difference” (Collins, p. 27, 2005). The Black female body (both Western and non-Western) has historically been a site of exploitation and objectification, but the Queens make efforts to reclaim and

control their bodies by sending messages of empowerment to audience members. Thus, examining the text through a Black feminist lens is necessary. I hesitate in naming the method I will use to examine and critique the Queens as a “Black feminist” one insofar as I realize the wide range of feminist thought Black American women contribute to their communities and to the field of rhetorical studies. I recognize the voices I invoke cover only a small section, but I also want to emphasize these theories wish to serve the interest of all oppressed groups by emphasizing the intersections of hierarchies and the specific standpoint of Black women that enable them to deconstruct systems of power.

CHAPTER PREVIEWS

This chapter will continue to work towards a theory of feminist humor—one that builds off of current comedy research by integrating radical feminist thought (mostly that of Black feminisms). I wish to move towards a theory that not only acknowledges the power of comedy when articulating intersecting oppressions, but considers it to be one of the cornerstones of humor theory. Thus, integrating radical Black feminist thought into humor research is an imperative aspect of this chapter. First, I review Black feminist thought and the ways in which this sector of feminist scholarship articulates the intersections of oppression and the importance of coalition building among women. Next, I review past and current research regarding humor and communication. I examine rhetorical theories of humor, focusing on psychoanalytic perspectives. Finally, I move towards a feminist theory of humor that seeks to include women who experience intersecting oppressions. Considering the literature review that outlines Black feminist thought and rhetorical humor, I argue that effective feminist humor should meet the

following criteria: rejecting traditional masculine joke forms, rebelling in subject matter, and realigning disenfranchised groups.

Chapter two will begin to closely examine *The Queens of Comedy*. This chapter focuses on the dimensions of the Queens' performance that do not empower audiences, but rather further marginalize the Black women. I will analyze instances in which comedians Mo'Nique and Sommore perform humor in ways that objectify the Black female body, encourage a dependence on Black men, and employ homophobic rhetoric. These performances weaken the Queens' efforts to create unity among Black women, and do not make use of feminist humor in ways that empower audiences.

In chapter three, I will also be closely analyzing the text of *The Queens of Comedy*. I will examine dimensions of the Queens' performances that articulate Black feminist thought and how those performances encourage coalition building among Black women. I will utilize my construction of feminist humor from chapter one to demonstrate how the Queens inform feminist thought. I argue they do so by rebelling in their content, rejecting traditional joke form, and realigning women. The texts examined in this chapter demonstrate how feminist humor may be used to both uplift marginalized groups and simultaneously bond them through laughter.

The concluding chapter will address implications of the text as well as concluding statements. In this chapter I wish to address the negative reviews the Queens received from mainly white male critics. I examine the ways in which the Queens' performances create out-groups, and also seek to understand how "insider discourse" can continue to empower oppressed groups without mainstream acceptance. Finally, I address questions and suggestions for those who wish to continue examining feminist humor rhetoric.

Reviewing Black Feminist Thought

“the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.”—Audre Lorde, 2007

The rise of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s brought about a multiplicity of voices in the women’s movement. While white, middle-class women dominated much of feminist discourse, women who occupied other oppressions took part in both the women’s movement as a whole, and also created spaces specific to their circumstances. African American women, especially, led the forefront in rejecting a white female perspective as a universal one in feminist political theory and action. Lorde (2007) explains, “even within the women’s movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive” (p. 42).

Black feminist scholars have agreed that because feminist and anti-racist projects have largely ignored women of color, Black women have a unique standpoint that allows them to articulate intersecting oppressions. That is, a Black feminist perspective is one that may be able to recognize and explain the ways in which race and gender weave together with many factors of American life. “Since their forced migration to the Americas, women of African descent have struggled with the multiple realities of gender, racial, and economic or caste oppression...in the process, they have created space for a more viable democracy...” (James and Sharpley-Whiting, 2000, p.1). Collins (2000) explains two important aspects that create a foundation for Black feminist thought. First, “black women’s political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of

experiences that offers a different view of material reality than that available to other groups” (p. 184). Next, the latter statement allows the subordinate group (in this case, African American women) to develop an awareness concerning their material reality, and their interpretation of that reality allows for a “distinctive black feminist consciousness” (p. 184) to arise.

In 1977 Angela Davis proclaimed, “The new content and contours of the women’s movement are doubtlessly attributable in part to its emergence within, and often in unavoidable opposition to, other social struggles” (p. 146). Indeed, it is this sentiment that shapes Black feminist thought as multidimensional. Feminist projects have routinely ignored or downplayed experiences of women of color. Collins explains

Not only are women of color in fact overlooked [in feminist rhetoric] but their exclusion is reinforced when white women speak for and as women....feminists thus ignore how their own race functions to mitigate some aspects of sexism and moreover, how it often privileges them over and contributes to the domination of other women. (2000, p. 221)

Therefore, Black American feminists have worked to articulate the ways in which gender and race are inextricably linked and tied to other social structures such as class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.

Intersecting oppressions shape the perspectives of African American women in ways that complicate and challenge white feminist standpoints. Crenshaw (2000) emphasizes the importance of recognizing intersectionality as a distinctive experience of those coming from multiple oppressed groups. Black feminists such as The Combahee River Collective proclaimed that they are in a unique position to construct a social movement that integrates elimination of classist, sexist, racist, and heterosexist institutions. “We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual or class privilege to rely upon

nor do we have the minimal access to resources of power that groups who possess any one of these types of privilege have” (2000, p. 67). These intersections, as Collins would explain, “stimulate a distinctive black feminist consciousness concerning that material reality” (2000, p. 184). This distinctive vantage point creates oppositional knowledge, which according to Collins would ideally foster “the group’s self-definition and self-determination” (p. 279).

However, it is important to recognize that differences within Black feminist thought do indeed exist, and just as many other sects of feminist thought, majority voices may silence marginalized voices within the movement. hooks explains in her essay “Revolutionary Black Women” the importance of recognizing the variety of voices within the Black feminist movement. She explains that while coming together through similar struggles of racism may ground Black feminist thought, ignoring or silencing differences among women may be of detriment to the movement.

Certainly, a collective black female experience has been about the struggle to survive in diaspora. It is the intensity of that struggle, the fear of failure (as we face daily the reality that many black people do not and are not surviving) that has led many black women thinkers, especially within the feminist movement, to wrongly assume that strength in unity can only exist if difference is suppressed and shared experience is highlighted. (hooks, 1992, p. 51)

Essentializing a Black female perspective prevents us from negotiating and bridging discourses from other disciplines. For example, the political struggles experienced by Black queer women have often been ignored in both racial and feminist social movements. “Lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered people of color who are committed to the demise of oppression in its various forms, cannot afford to theorize their lives based on “single-variable politics” (Johnson and Henderson, 2007, p. 5). Keeling

(2007) further articulates this point when explaining that queer women of color may benefit both Black and Queer studies and thus open the audience up to many vantage points: “‘black lesbian’ still can provide a salient critique of the sexism and heterosexism of dominant articulations of ‘blackness,’ of racism and heterosexism of dominant articulations of ‘women,’ and of the racism of dominant articulations of ‘lesbian.’” (p. 220). Fully integrating the multiplicity of a Black feminist perspective can allow the movement to deconstruct isolated perceptions and allow for a more informed consciousness—one that recognizes and celebrates differences rather than rejecting marginalized women.

Both self-definition and determination allows the individual and collective to gain power and place oneself within the realm of social change. Collins continues that kindling Black feminist thought is a method of breaking silence—it is not a discovery of one’s oppression, but rather it is a way to articulate one’s experience under oppressive regimes. Discovering outlets that allow Black women to articulate their experiences can be not only empowering for the individual, but the collective as well. “Breaking the silence represents less of a discovery of these unequal power relations than a breaking through into the public arena of what oppressed groups have long expressed in private. Publicly articulating rage typically constitutes less a revelation about oppression than a discovery of voice” (1998, p. 47). In the sections that follow, I will strive to explain the ways in which humorous forms of communication may serve as a method for Black feminists to discover their voices and bring together women’s individual and communal experiences.

Humor in Communication

Humorous forms of communication have been somewhat of a mystery for rhetorical scholars. From classical rhetoric to present scholarship, comedy, satire, and irony have indeed been prevalent modes of communication to uncover. Muecke (as cited in Kaufer, 1977) states:

In his [Cicero's] usage it [irony] is either the rhetorical figure or the wholly admirable as a pervasive habit of discourse...To these meanings of irony recognized by Cicero, the rhetorician Quintillian added an intermediary one, irony as elaboration of a figure of speech into an entire argument...By the middle of the eighteenth century the concept of irony in England, and as far as I know, in other European countries, has scarcely evolved, in its broad outlines, beyond the point already reached in Quintillian. (p. 91)

Scholars earlier in the twentieth century clung to the idea of parody, irony and other forms of humor as less effective forms of persuasion (Karstetter, 1964). Baird states: "humor consists in stating the incongruous. Every debater will be on the alert to detect these incongruities. He will make swift descents from the solemn to the trivial, from the serious and straightforward to the satirical and ironic, from premise apparently accepted to conclusions which turns out to be an example of *reductio ad absurdum*" (Baird, 1928, p. 292). The treatment of humor as a vague and more difficult communicative tool to examine has not lessened its prevalence in both the works of artists and scholars. In 1964 Karstetter proclaimed while it is not easy to unpack satirical undertones, it is the semantic process of the "reversal of a word or two, and the figure in which the speaker has invented a disguise for a lengthy passage or even a whole speech, is a useful one" (p. 166) and may be "effective rhetorical tools in almost any circumstance" (p. 178).

Kaufer (1977) states that the most difficult aspect of investigating the rhetorical effectiveness of humor is the notion that the audience must understand the rhetor—through agreement or disagreement. However, this notion of comedy as successful tool for persuasion has made some scholars uneasy—putting the responsibility for cognitive understanding in the audience’s hands assumes a certain universal recognition of what is irony. Perelman finds just that when he states that humor “cannot be used if there is uncertainty about the speaker” (Perelman as cited in Kaufer, 1977, p. 94). Because joke telling assumes a universal and intimate relationship with the audience and rhetor, the lines of communicative effectiveness when utilizing humor as a tool for social change is indeed blurred.

Hutcheon (1995) explains that in using comedy (irony or otherwise) the joke teller performs the act of humorous communication and thus “attributes both meanings and motives—and does so in a particular situation and context, for a particular purpose and particular means” (p. 12). Research regarding humor in communication has thus placed a large emphasis upon the performer as autonomous from the audience. Much like the fourth wall in theatre, there is a distinct separation between teller and listener. As such, Kaufer (1977) explains that in order for comedy to be rhetorically effective, the artist should utilize irony that “keeps incompatible audiences at bay...since these audience [those who do not ‘get it’] are incompatible, the speaker cannot appease one without alienating the other [those that do ‘get it’]” (p. 103). Further, Kaufer explains that the rhetor should utilize comedy in such a way that that creates distinct in and out groups—often victimizing the audience in such a way that performer and listener do not find cohesion through laughter, but rather by creating a third-party enemy (1977).

Both cultural and biological theories concentrate on humor and comedy as a bonding mechanism that relies on a specific attack. Gangnier (1988) explains that paleopsychologists, literary scholars, linguists, and sociologists that humor “originated in the Laugh, generally represented as the primal roar of triumph over the Enemy. From this benign genesis evolved the humorous practices of ridiculing the Victim and wit at the Victim’s expense” (p. 135). Humor thus became a method of establishing power and authority over an individual or group.

In psychoanalytic realms, the joke form is also one of aggression; it is a release of frustration whose blow is lessened by comedic undertones. Freud’s analysis of humor in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* explains the joke as a method of letting go of suppressed desires. Despite a joke’s playfulness, it serves to, in actuality, be “directed against people and objects which lay claim to authority and respect” (1960, 200). Hutcheon (1994) explains that the function of this joke structure is “one of cutting derisive, destructive attack or sometimes of a bitterness that may suggest no desire to correct but simply a need to register contempt and scorn” (p. 54). Even comedy that is deemed innocent or less aggressive, serves as a method of release for the teller as she or he exposes desires through performative acts. “The motive force for the production of innocent jokes is not infrequently an ambitious urge to show one’s cleverness, to display oneself—an instinct that may be equated with exhibitionism...” (Freud, 1960, p. 175).

In sum, the comic, the audience, and the object of the joke have traditionally been placed under patriarchic and at times, misogynistic restraints. Those performing comic acts have been assigned to the role of attacker and those listening may participate in the

release of aggression through laughter directed at an object. Humor is thus released from a place of authority or power, towards a less privileged other.

Women and Humor

In the *Purloined Punchline: Joke as Textual Paradigm*, Jerry Aline Flieger analyzes the gendered positions in Freud's joke triangle: 1.) male joker 2.) female object of joke and 3.) male listener-voyeur. In this sense "Flieger deconstructs Freud's gendered triangular positions, demonstrating that the male and female rose of the joke triangle are interchangeable. Theoretically, at least, women can use joking in the same way men can, although historically we have more often been consigned to the passive position, butt of smut" (Reincke, 1991, p. 28). Beyond Flieger's analysis, however, it is important to examine the ways in which Freud views the joke-listener or "third person" within the triangle. Freud explains that in addition to an attack, joke-making becomes pleasurable when the third party also experiences pleasure and discharges physical laughter. Interestingly enough, this also causes an objectification of the listener: "Everything in jokes that is aimed at gaining pleasure is calculated with an eye to the third person, as though there were internal and insurmountable obstacles to it in the first person. And this gives us a full impression of how indispensable the third person is for the completion of the joking process" (Freud, 1960, p. 190).

In this vein, the past decade or so has brought about much discussion against the gender biases existing in discourse regarding humor. Caliskan (1995) posits that communicative acts which are based mainly on joke telling and humorist forms are incredibly gender-specific because they have the power to either solidify or reject notions

of what is “feminine” or “masculine” both in style and subject matter. She states: “To be funny is to be assertive, aggressive, and forceful; that is, everything a ‘good girl’ is not supposed to be” (p. 4). Navigating the blurry lines of comedic performances often proves to be difficult, and because studies of humor have historically been focused on the joke as a form of aggression—one in which masculine communicative styles dominate a conversation or performance space, subversive use of humor (specifically women’s) has often gone ignored. Some go as far as to say that a “female” sense of humor is nonexistent. Due to the assumed aggressive nature of humor, women may be seen as either unable to utilize comedy effectively or in fact, utilize it at all.

Christopher Hitchens boldly provoked this idea in a January 2007 issue of *Vanity Fair* with an article entitled “Why Women Aren’t Funny.” Hitchens proclaims women do have a sense of humor, but often are unable to execute comedy well. In the rare instances that ladies can play with the boys by undertaking assertive modes of communication, Hitchens classifies funny women as ‘hefty or dykey or Jewish or some combo of the three. Gangier (1988) states that “the position for the joke-teller according to Freud is a position of frustrated desire—entirely acceptable for women in our culture. In such a case, hostility from women may be pleurably confirming for men as evidence that women are still feeling relatively powerless” (p. 134).

Clearly, from Freud’s approach to the joke well into present, popular culture has placed women utilizing comedy well out of sight—disregarding women’s use of humor as a potential mode of resistance. What, then composites a “woman’s” sense of humor? How, if at all, have women used humor on *their* terms and what do those terms look like? Reinecke (1991) explains:

women have always been joking, have always been laughing knowingly, but have not always been heard, including by feminist especially if the knowing, laughing women are working class and the feminists are middle class. Women's laughter counteracts dominance when it constructs a counter knowledge, a counter knowledge that is collectively produced through female bonding across barriers of class and race. The threat to male dominance isn't women laughing at men, it's women laughing with women. (p. 35)

But if this threat to male dominance of which Reinecke writes exists within women's humor, then it must, in some way, supersede "traditional" forms of comedy. However, much literature outlining women in humor focuses primarily the differences between men and women in humor, or speaks of women's humor as a direct response to male comics. For example, Barreca (1991) discusses women's humor in terms of socialization: "For most women, humor occupies a different space emotionally and socially that it does for men. For most women, humor is something we aren't sure how to use, because we've been told it's something we haven't got" (p. 11).

Although literature exists outlining the differences between male and female humor, I believe it is important to move beyond these binaries that simply compare styles of comedy. Many feminists and female comedians have used humor as an important mode of defiance, but theories regarding feminist use of humor are lacking. By feminist humor, I mean to refer to the ways in which comedy acts as a form of aggression against culturally imposed restraints and a method of celebrating women's experiences. As such, I believe it is important to move towards a feminist mode of humor that stays faithful to the multiplicity of women's experience—specifically, to include women of color who utilize humor as modes of resistance. Integrating a Black feminist perspective into the rhetoric of humor may give scholars, performers, and audiences a lens with which to view the transformative clout of comedy and its ability not only entertain, but to

articulate viewpoints which so often go ignored.

Feminist humor has political implications which encourage extended political action rather than simple momentary release or a quick disparagement against a singular enemy. Rather it promotes resistance against social structures that marginalize women and minority groups. Feminist humor may take on a process of ‘imaginative engagement.’ (Gangier, 1988, p. 140)

Moving towards a feminist mode of humor that not only includes, but also celebrates women of color in the United States may serve to strengthen Black feminist rhetoric and open the minds of all people who strive towards social change and equality.

IDENTIFYING FEMINIST HUMOR

Inherent in humor is the creation of groups. In spite of both the aggression and exhibitionism the joke-teller possesses, even Freud claims “every joke calls for a public of its own” (1960, p. 185) and that groups laughing together indicate a specific conformity. Feminist discourse may utilize humor by partaking “in the ‘de-centering, dislocating, and de-stabling’ of cultural authority” (Gillooly, 1991, p. 2). With this in mind, it is evident that effective feminist humor should meet the following criteria: rejecting traditional masculine joke forms, rebelling in subject matter, and realigning disenfranchised groups. Although these three tenets are not the only ways women’s humor may act as a rhetorical strategy, these do serve as a model for deconstructing Freud’s joke paradigm and coalition building among women through comedic performances.

Rejecting

First, feminist humor rejects the aggressive nature of the joke-teller. When describing 19th and 20th century humor among Victorian women, Gagnier (1988) explains

that “Working women find humor in cross-class scenarios disrupting the social order and upper class women in disrupting the codes and regulations of their own class. This suggests that women’s humor tends toward anarchy rather than the status quo, to prolonged disruption rather than in Freudian theory, momentary release” (p. 144-145). For example, comedian Lily Tomlin is specifically known for her creation of characters rather than traditional jokes. The humor thus comes from an enjoyment of her theatrical process and narratives than from an instant punch line. Dolan (2005) explains that this sort of performance, may bring about a specific bonding between performer and audience Tomlin’s ability to create character-driven humor and performance, elicits a utopian experience which “moves me into the theoretical and experiential realm of affect, into the live, present tense relationship between performers and spectators in a particular historical moment and a specific geographic location.” (p. 497)

When feminist humor is used as a method of subversion, the Western dichotomy of subject/object inherent in the joke structure is not necessarily effective. Rather, narrative and character based humor is often utilized as a method of bonding. Gillooly (1991) states, “because readers have historically been taught to identify and appreciate the presence of humor according to ‘universal’ standards and to privilege certain of these [masculine forms of humor] over others, they frequently ignore or misread humor produced by women...”(p. 2). Caliskan (1995) asserts that dominant ideas of what a comical persona is are as follows: “To be funny is to be assertive, aggressive, and forceful; that is, everything a ‘good girl’ is not supposed to be” (p. 4). However, she goes on to explain that many women utilize humor to deal with oppression, but deliver jokes in a manner that move “beyond the anger and resentment caused by this oppression” (p. 7).

Rebelling

Next, feminist humor rebels. Cixous (as cited in Reinecke, 1991, p. 29) writes of the dominance of male law that it is “a question of submitting feminine disorder, its laughter...to the threat of decapitation--order in the court.” Female voices (including the occasional laugh or two) have historically been silenced by dominant culture. The male desire to control women’s humor is similar to that of their desire to control women’s sexuality. Women’s humor (especially among themselves) may be viewed as a threat to masculine power.

Comedy that recognizes the value of female experience may be an important step in developing a culture that allows women to self-critically question the stereotypes that have governed our lives. A strong rebellious humor empowers women to examine how we have been objectified and fetishized and to what extent we have led to perpetuate this objectification. (Merrill, 1988, p. 279)

Comedic performances that either include or are specific to women of color, however, may further inform and raise a feminist consciousness while rebelling against what is considered appropriate discourse. African Americans have historically utilized their marginalized identities in performance to fight against oppression. Davis (2002) states in her essay “Theatre Without Borders”:

Blacks were run out of Broadway theatres at the beginning of the [twentieth] century just as they were trying to develop what would become the Broadway musical and stand-up comedy, and more important, trying to develop the work that spoke of our experience after slavery. The humor was aimed at life, not race. The white press moaned over the death of the good ol’ darkey show. (p. 24)

Rebelling in subject matter not only allows audiences with similar experiences to relate, but for those outside of the performer’s standpoint to be challenged. For example, Lee (2004) explains that for female standup comics like Margaret Cho, humor often possesses the potential to trouble issues of class, race, and gender by bringing to the forefront things

the audience may “already know but have actively tried to disremember” (p. 177) and thus calls to attention shameful bigotry and discrimination marginalized groups face. Feminist humor may describe intercategorical experiences, subverting dominant cultural discourse rather than complying with it.

This community building may allow for the creation of counterpublics, which act as important spaces for marginalized groups. “when people address publics they engage in struggles—at varying levels of salience to consciousness, from calculated tacti to mute cognitive noise—over the conditions that bring them together as a public” (Warner, p. 12) When marginalized groups address each other, *for* each other, they create counterpublics. Humorous forms of communication which act as a rebellious feminist act may encourage counterpublic spaces simply as they are instances in which women are speaking together. Warner (2002) continues, “Women speaking in public bring about a distinct challenge in the public vs. private split. “Public and private are bound up with the elementary relations to language as well as to the body” (p. 24). Because disenfranchised groups have historically been silenced (or many times, unheard) feminist comedy is unauthorized discourse and a rebellious act both in finding community and fighting victimization under oppressive institutions.

Realigning

Third, feminist humor realigns. Kenneth Burke explains in *A Rhetoric of Motives* that identification is central to rhetorical effectiveness. Without identification, one cannot transform. However, one cannot, according to Burke, have identification without division. When an individual or group identifies with something, they are also ridding

themselves of that which they are not.

In pure identification there would be no strife. Likewise, there would be no strife in absolute separateness, since opponents can join battle only through a mediatory ground that makes their communication possible, thus providing the first condition necessary for the interchange of blows. (1969, p. 24)

Through rejecting masculine forms of humor and rebelling in subject manner, a feminist humor realigns performer and audience to both identify with each other and move away from oppressive cultural restraints. This division may be effective, but is not always beneficial. It is important to be aware of feminist humor that may alienate or attack other marginalized groups. Just as it is important for Black feminist thought to integrate queer voices, humorous forms of communication also hold the power to isolate and move away from perspectives that would be valuable to feminist discourse. Lorde emphasizes the importance of including a variety of Black female perspectives in community building by explaining, “When Black women in this country come together to examine our sources of strength and support, and to recognize our common social, cultural, emotional and political interests, it is a development which can only contribute to the power of the black community as a whole” (2007, p. 96).

Elam (2002) insists that performative spaces are important venues for both the examination and construction of cultural identification. They “not only reflect the changing dynamics of cultural identity within the existent social order, but can make their own claim, structure their own circumstances, and raise significant questions about how race operates and how it interacts with issues of gender, sexuality, class, and culture” (p. 98). Feminist humor can and should utilize the unique potential performance holds by bringing women and other marginalized groups together through comedy. In both

rebellious and rejecting standard methods of joke-telling, feminist humor encourages a connection between performer and audience member. As Bing (2004) states: humor can disrupt ideas of what is “normal” and encourage people to question their assumptions. This, in many ways, creates a new territory in performance—forming allies among those who are usually the object of the joke.

CHAPTER TWO: HUMOR AND DIVISION

Divisive Performance

In February of 2005, Tyler Perry's *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* was released. The film grossed 25 million dollars in its opening weekend, but received very controversial reviews. The film, like many of Perry's projects, seeks to blend genres (i.e. comedy, drama, melodrama, action) and stars a predominantly Black cast. Perry stars in the film as Grandma Medea, a towering "big mama," who is the drag queen heroine—protecting the women in her family from heartbreak while acting as the comic relief. Roger Ebert gave the film a shameful one star, concluding, "I've been reviewing movies for a long time, and I can't think of one that more dramatically shoots itself in the foot" (Ebert, 2005). Users of Ebert's website, however, gave the film three and a half out of four stars and bombarded his email inbox—accusing him of blatant racism and disregard for African American cinema.

What ensued was an unprecedented exchange between critic and audience. After receiving more emails after his review than any other in his career (Ebert, 2005), Ebert decided to open his website and allow readers to publicly respond to his review. Some posts blasted Ebert—claiming he could not possibly understand the humor of Perry's characters. Blogger Dedra Brown wrote, "Before your critics review Black Films, make sure they do their research. How can they say something is not true, just because it doesn't fit into their White world?" (Brown, 2005). Many other Ebert fans echoed Brown's statements.

The posts Ebert decided to publish indeed represented varied opinions from African American audiences and even fellow movie critics. In response to the outpouring of emails and blog posts, he decided to write a second review—clarifying, but not retracting his original statements about the film. Ebert stated that while he understands that he perhaps does not “get it” as a white audience member, Perry’s portrayal of Medea was not an appealing one on screen. He stated, “Okay, I get it. I refuse to accept the theory that I am racist because I disliked the film.” (Ebert, 2005).

Soon enough, outrage at Ebert subsided. However, the controversy over *Diaries of A Mad Black Woman* is indicative of the larger power comedic performances play in dividing audiences. While some viewed Ebert’s review as racist, others defended him. Some bloggers lamented that Medea was silly, and failed to empower Black audiences or increase the credibility of Black cinema in mainstream media. What this instance does show the critic, is that performances cannot avoid political implications. Even if certain humorous acts claim to simply entertain, issues such as class, race, gender, sexuality, etc. are often unavoidable. Thus, it is imperative to look at whether or not performances empower the audiences they claim to serve, or continue to marginalize them.

Although the previous chapter outlines the ways in which comedy may act as a relief in regards to cultural taboos and unite audiences, it is also important to examine the ways that humor (claiming to be feminist or otherwise) may perpetuate oppressive ideologies (i.e. racism, sexism, or homophobia). I wish to investigate the ways in which the Queens perform comedy in ways that divide their audiences, rather than bond them. While the majority of the performers’ material indicates that the Queens have a strong commitment to uniting women, particularly women of color, it is important to note that

not all aspects of the film serve to empower and uplift marginalized groups. This chapter seeks to unpack the divisive humor the Queens employ towards African American women (both in and out of the immediate audience). Specifically, comics Mo’Nique and Sommore perform material that marginalizes women in three ways: a hyperbolic performance of the feminine that emphasizes objectification of the body, dependence on Black men, and attacking queer identities.

Although hooks (2000) explains, “To experience solidarity, we must have a community of shared interests, shared beliefs, and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood” (p. 67). Interestingly enough, divisive performances during *The Queens of Comedy* rarely alienate racial out-groups such as white audiences or other people of color. Even African American males remain in the background of humorous backlash. The material in the film that encourages division does so by assailing African American women. It is imperative to examine these instances in order to move towards a feminist mode of humor that not only allows the performer to articulate her oppressions, but to create a sense of community for empathetic and sympathetic audiences.

Norma Alarcón explains that by understanding divisions both within ourselves and among each other, feminist projects hold the power to create “a sense of agency and urgency as to how to we were going to integrate our many selves and integrate ourselves within our communities” (2007, p. i). While the Queens often employ rhetoric that seeks to unite women, the dimensions of the performances examined in this chapter undermine efforts to create and encourage feminist communities. Therefore, I will first be examining the ways in which the Queens divide audiences through objectification of the Black female body. Next, I will explore language employed by the Queens that encourage

subservient behavior towards Black males. Third, I will critique the heterosexist and homophobic nature of the Queens' performances.

Dividing The Black Female Body

Carver (2003) describes a female performance as an inherently "risky business" because a woman's body on stage is an authoritative stance—one in which the objectified body moves to subject, taking charge of her own public terrain. The female body, as a site of oppression and colonization can thus rebel through public performance. What Carver fails to acknowledge, however, is the importance of content in performative acts. Young (2005) explains that for a female body, moving to the realm of subject is a difficult task as patriarchal regimes are difficult to escape:

If we move from a male gaze in which woman is the Other, the object, solid and definite, to imagine the woman's point of view, the breasted body becomes...without a clear identity. The project of giving voice to a specifically female desire is an important one for feminism, I think, but it does not exist somewhere underlying phallocentric desire. (Young, 2005, p. 80)

Specifically, when the female body on stage is also one of color, a number of additional factors play into the politics of women's performances. The Black female body is one that has been historically and continues to be hypersexualized. Women of African descent have historically been associated with animalistic, deviant, hypersexuality, which "not only upheld racism but it did so in gender-specific ways" (Collins, 2005, p. 101). A Black woman may experience a double bind during a performance. While the act of being on stage is one of social protest—moving from private to public—the Black female body on stage may be subject to unfair and oppressive scrutiny. As Collins explains, "The racial and gender meanings assigned to Black bodies as well as the social meanings of

Black sexuality in American society overall constitute sites of contestation in an uncivil civil war against Black people” (Collins, 2005, p. 51).

While a performer may not be able to control the audience’s gaze, and whether or not that gaze continues to perpetuate hegemonic viewpoints, a solo performer (in this case, a comic) can control the content of the performance. The subject matter can and does play a large role in audience’s perception of the performer. To act on stage, for a woman, is a kind of dissent, but her subject matter may not necessarily reflect a feminist standpoint. As women move from the private to public sphere on stage, it is quite possible to perpetuate and participate in her own objectification, and thus the objectification of other women

Sommore, the second woman to perform her standup routine in *The Queens of Comedy* demonstrates the complexities that arise for female solo performers when the action of being on stage and words uttered during that time conflict. When Sommore takes the stage she (like the rest of the women) enter through a revolving pyramid, which stands in the center of the stage. The pyramid turns around to reveal Sommore walking down the steps in a silk robe. She walks to the front of the stage and encourages the audience to clap louder, as this is her first performance since being released from jail.

While the audience increases their applause, she turns around and takes off her robe, revealing a tight leather body suit and skirt. The audience again goes wild as she explains, “First they started up football players, then they started lockin’ up rappers, and now they lockin’ up bitches with good pussy!” (Sommore, 2001). This line certainly sets the tone for the rest of the performance. The audience begins to laugh and clap uproariously. Sommore goes on for several sentences before referring to herself as “I,”

but bookends it by calling herself “a bitch.” She states, “Baby they put a bitch in jail...but I was strong... a bitch was strong” (Sommere, 2001).

Sommere’s use of the word bitch does not seem to be simple word reclamation. Although she seems to be trying to use the word in a way to describe herself (a very brass, outspoken woman), placing the “a” in front of “bitch,” creates the sense that she is talking about someone else. In this instance, Sommore creates a distant gaze towards herself—taking on a misogynistic perspective that dehumanizes her own body. The action of taking off her robe may indicate a pride and love of her body. However, that action coupled with the text may establish Sommore as a sexual object for the audience, which consumes her with pleasure.

Additionally, she describes her jail time as unjustified specifically as it relates to her sexuality. Moreover, she does not generally imply her whole self as sexual, but rather refers only to her vagina—reducing herself to a part rather than a whole. Lorde (2007) warns that reclamation of the body can be dangerous and ineffective if we do not radically move away from normative and oppressive regimes. She states, “But if the quest to reclaim ourselves and each other remains there, then we risk another superficial measurement of self, one superimposed upon the old one and almost as damaging...Certainly it is no more empowering” (Lorde, 2007, p. 174). Indeed, it seems as if Sommore is trying to communicate a sense of independence and strength to the audience when she begins her performance. However, considering that she immediately creates an on-stage persona that is both a fragmented and third person (“a bitch”) self, she fails in assuming the position of subject rather than object.

Sommore's routine continues to fragment when she discusses her desire for a different type of body for herself. She moves towards the topic of her buttocks, explaining how important it is for her to have a larger one. Collins (2005) explains that the discussion of an African American woman's "booty" is deeply tied to women's genitalia, sexual intercourse, and her entire body. These connections come from Western perceptions of Black culture and sexuality. "The term 'booty' not only suggests that women of African descent are ground zero for the meanings associated with the term *booty* but also the historical meanings of Black promiscuity are alive and well in contemporary popular culture" (p. 151). In other words, "booty" as wealth and "booty" as the Black woman's body are equated.

While Sommore does not specifically use the term booty, she does refer to her buttocks as not only a fragmented entity of her body, and also as one that is both an object of a male gaze. This act perpetuates stereotypes regarding Black female bodies. She states:

I'm for real, that's my number one prayer—to give me a big ass. The titties is alright, but the ass is kinda flat. Bitch is wide, but it ain't got no weight on it. I want a ass so big that when I'm walking through the club a man can put a drink on my ass and I don't even know its there...I want me a big ol' iggnit ass...I hate to see other women with big ol ass. Imma get me a big ass. (Sommore, 2001)

Sommore seems to be making three anti-feminist moves in this section. First, she is reducing her body to breasts and buttocks. Second, she is objectifying herself through a male gaze. Third, she is pitting herself against other women with more desirable body types.

First, Sommore defines her sexual power through her breasts and buttocks. Young explains the ways in which certain body parts, specifically breasts, come to define

the essence of what a woman is in a patriarchal society. “Breasts are the most visible sign of a woman’s femininity, the signal of her sexuality...Capitalist, patriarchal American media-dominated culture objectifies breasts before a distancing gaze that freezes and masters” (2005, p. 78). While Young’s point certainly rings true to the majority of American women, it is also important to understand the ways in which the buttocks (specifically for Black American women) has also been the site of objectification and oppression. For example, nineteenth century slave Sarah Baartman was captured and put on public display so white audiences could gawk at her large buttocks. “From the display of Sarah Baartman as a sexual ‘freak’ of nature...to the animal-skin bikinis worn by ‘bootylicious’ Destiny’s Child,” (Collins, p. 26, 2005). Describing that she wants an “iggnit ass” (or ignorant ass) separates her from the self and emphasizes negative views of women of color (i.e. lack of intelligence). In this case, Sommore’s material reflects Western culture’s treatment of Black women and their bodies: they have been reduced to specific parts that highlight stereotypical views of wild, animalistic sexuality. Her “number one prayer,” as she explains it, is to have desirable parts that essentialize the female body and reduce it to an objectified Other.

Next, When Sommore states “The titties is alright, but the ass is kinda flat. Bitch is wide, but it ain’t got no weight on it” (Sommore, 2001), she distinctly separates the two body parts from her whole. Avoiding possessive terms like “my” or “mine” indicates that both her breasts and her buttocks are not hers. “The” breasts and “the” ass create a tone in which those specific parts of her body are, in fact, someone else’s. They are separated objects to be discussed as such. “We experience our objectification as a function of the look of the other, the male gaze that judges and dominates from afar”

(Young, 2005, p. 77). Sommore is both separating her whole self from her breasts and buttocks, while at the same time using those body parts to define herself. This creates a distinctly masculine gaze. If Sommore does not own the breasts and buttocks, then they become objects to be owned. When stating, “I want a ass so big that when I’m walking through the club a man can put a drink on my ass and I don’t even know its there,” she gives up her buttocks to the male gaze and male ownership. If her ass becomes a table for a drink, it is no longer a part of her body, but a piece of furniture to serve the interests of leisurely males. Her sexual identity thus becomes constructed through radical black misogynistic underpinnings that fragment the Black female body rather than liberate her.

Finally, Sommore specifically evokes stereotypes of the Black American woman, and also pits herself in direct competition with other females. When she exclaims, “I want me a big ol’ iggnit ass” she links stereotypes of the Black woman’s body as well as her mental incompetence. Spillers (2001) explains that the exploitation and oppression of Black American women involved both the body and the mind. To view and to keep a Black woman ignorant is a method of owning and objectifying the body. Additionally, Sommore expresses disdain for other women who have what she want: a desirable (at least from a male gaze) buttocks. She clearly states, “I hate to see other women with big ol ass.” Lorde (2007) explains that hatred is used specifically to destroy—that it can divide over any other emotional expression. “As Black women, we have shared so many similar experiences. Why doesn’t this commonality bring us closer together instead of setting us at each other’s throats with weapons well-honed by familiarity?” (p. 153).

Sommore’s representation of her body is ironically distant. Although she is the only performer on stage and is speaking her own words, she seems to be refusing to

invest in her own subjectivity and thus the subjectivity of female audiences. hooks warns of the complications that arise when one attempts to articulate desire and sexual identity as sources for feminist agency: “Black female sexual agency remains rooted in misogynist notions. Rather than being a pleasure-based eroticism, it is ruthless, violent; it is about women using sexual power to do violence to the male Other” (1992, p. 69). It is imperative that female performers utilize their material (comedic or otherwise) to strive towards a radical feminist gaze—one that moves away from objectification and towards reclamation of the body on the terms of those whose bodies are exploited. Lorde (2007) explains that Black women must move past a normalized view of the body, and find solidarity in feminist cohesion. She states:

Theorizing about self-worth is ineffective...Learning to love ourselves as Black women goes beyond a simplistic instance that ‘Black is beautiful.’ It goes beyond and deeper than a surface appreciation of Black beauty, although that is certainly a good beginning...We can practice being gentle with each other by being gentle with that piece of ourselves that is hardest to hold. (p. 174-175)

Dividing Women Against Men

Audre Lorde’s essay “Scratching the Surface” emphasizes the need for coalition building among all African Americans and those who wish to invest in a Black feminist ideology. However, she explains that competition for heterosexual partnership often gets in the way of solidarity among women. “War, imprisonment, and ‘the street’ have decimated the ranks of Black males of a marriageable age. ... Black women are programmed to define ourselves within this male attention and to compete with each other for it rather than to recognize and move upon our common interests” (Lorde, 2007, p. 48). She calls this competition among Black American women for Black men as “horizontal hostility.” The following section examines a portion of comedian

Mo’Nique’s material that echoes the very problem Lorde addresses. Much of Mo’Nique’s material focuses on importance of heterosexual relationships between African Americans. However, she avoids a subjugated feminist gaze and continually reiterates the importance of keeping one’s male partner, no matter the circumstances. Specifically, she encourages three elements of horizontal hostility. First, she excuses sexual abuse in order to maintain heterosexual sexual satisfaction. Next, she encourages competition among women for Black males. Finally, she emphasizes sexual objectification in order keep her heterosexual romantic relationships.

Mo’Nique’s time on stage is, according to audience reaction, the most energetic and perhaps the funniest out of all women. Mo’Nique, known for her television work on *The Parkers*, and Vh1’s *Charm School*, is certainly the most successful of all the Queens in popular culture. This particular routine covers a broad range of topics—including body image and even her use of the word “bitch” (which, she advocates). However, the majority of her material discusses heterosexual relationships between African Americans.

First, Mo’Nique begins a segment of her routine in which she discusses the difference between Black and white women—mainly the ways she believes white women are much more complacent and subservient to their male partners. However, she quickly refers to the lengths women (in this case Black women) will go to, to keep a sexually satisfying relationship. She states:

But sistas we got common sense. That’s one thing about black woman I cherish...Remember Lorena Bobbit? That was white woman shit. What in the fuck was she thinking? She cut the dick off and then she threw it upon the forest, and drove the fuck away. We ain’t never that motherfuckin’ mad baby; that nigga coulda whipped my ass and closed my right eye. (Mo’Nique, 2001)

While the case of Lorena Bobbit (who cut off her husband's penis in 1993 after he allegedly raped her) has been subject to much public mockery, Mo'Nique's punch line to this sequence is disturbing. She begins by unifying Black American women under the pretense that many have common sense, or what would be considered logical ways of thinking. However, when she states, "We ain't never that motherfuckin' mad baby...that nigga coulda whipped my ass and closed my right eye," she is essentially explaining that it is common sense to endure physical abuse in order to maintain a satisfying relationship.

Certainly, this text could be read as an instance of irony. Mo'Nique could be performing this material to ridicule the caricature she is performing. However, Mo'Nique's persona does indeed seem genuine. Cues from both the audience and Mo'Nique indicate that this performance is not ironical. Mo'Nique laughs when discussing Lorena Bobbit, but is more serious in tone when explaining that her partner "coulda whipped my right eye." The audience not only laughs, but applauds. Women are shown during this segment nodding in agreement.

Not only does this text fragment the Black male body by reducing him to a sex organ for a woman's benefit, but it also recreates a Black gender ideology that keeps women subordinated to masculine dominance. This is harmful for not only the body politics of Black women, but also of Black males. Western culture stereotypes Black males as hypersexualized and violent beings. Mo'Nique thus accepts normative, yet oppressive, stereotypes of heterosexual African Americans as "common sense."

Next, Mo'Nique creates a sense of horizontal hostility when discussing the ways in which she is possessive in her relationship with her husband. Previous to the text below, Mo'Nique explains that when she started making more money due to her

television success, she decided to get a maid. However, she was outraged when the cleaning company sent attractive women to her home. She laments that no woman should spend time alone with her husband and explains:

Black women you betta get yourself a black ass man and hold on to him cause you can't make it without him. Fuck what you heard, I love and worship the ground that a black man walk on. I will kill a bitch if she step to him [her husband]...and for all you women who got a man and you got a single girlfriend, fuck that bitch...I don't trust no one...When I leave every bitch in the house leave. (Mo'Nique, 2001)

Again, Mo'Nique participates in the division of Black women and men. This portion of the text both pits women against each other for heterosexual partnerships and reinforces the stereotype of African Americans as sexually deviant and promiscuous. To keep her husband, she will drive away solidarity with other women. Lorde (2007) explains,

This kind of action is a prevalent error among oppressed peoples. It is based upon the false notion that there is only a limited and particular amount of freedom that must be divided up between us, with the largest and juiciest pieces of liberty going as spoils to the victor or the stronger. (p. 51)

Mo'Nique thus defines Black males as precious resources to be contained, and also sacrifices potential bonds among women in order to maintain heterosexual partnerships. A radical Black feminist lens would wish for women to be able to find both love and trust for men and women, and not to forfeit feminist interests for romantic relationships. "We cannot settle for the pretenses of connection, or the parodies of self-love. We cannot continue to evade each other on the deepest levels because we fear each other's angers, not continue to believe that respect means never looking directly not with openness into another Black woman's eyes" (Lorde, p. 153, 2007).

Finally, Mo’Nique encourages sexual objectification in order to maintain and contain a Black heterosexual partnership. She states:

As a wife I know my place with my husband. Even though I make all the money, he is still the king of my castle. I give him what he wants, when he wants it, and the bitch is on time when he say be there, cause I’m not losing that. My husband calls me F.B.A.: the freakiest bitch in America. Cause what you won’t do, another bitch will...So if your man wants to stick his dick in your ear, lend that nigga your ear. Fuck what you heard. Handle your shit. Keep your man happy. (Mo’Nique, 2001)

To begin this portion of the text, Mo’Nique refers to her husband as “king of her castle.” A king would thus be the ultimate authority on her household and perhaps their public lives. She continues to emphasize the importance of subservient behavior in order to keep her husband: “cause I’m not losing that.” She then discusses that sexual acts play a large role in maintaining the happiness of her husband. She implies that she will do anything sexually to maintain the relationship, and reaches out to other women in the audience to do the same. Mo’Nique even seems to take pride in the term F.B.A. (Freakiest Bitch in America), and when she announces the meaning of the term, the audience responds with ample applause. However, as Collins (2005) explains, it is this very term (freak) that continues to stifle Black sexual politics which allow for the empowerment of African Americans.

the differing meanings associated with the term *freak* are situated at the crossroads of colonialism, science and entertainment. Through colonial eyes, the stigma of biological Blackness and the seeming primitiveness of African cultures marked the borders of extreme abnormality. For Western sciences that were mesmerized with body politics, White Western normality became constructed on the backs of Black deviance, with an imaged Black hyper-heterosexual deviance at the heart of the enterprise. (p. 120)

It is thus evident that portions of Mo’Nique’s text, like Sommore’s, reinforce Western notions of the Black body and Black sexuality as deviant and simultaneously to be

overly-protected in heterosexual relationships—often at the expense of a Black feminist project and sexual liberation of African Americans in general. While the task of completely radicalizing sexual politics of Black Americans does not (and should not) rest solely on the shoulders of a Mo’Nique (or any of the other Queens), it is important to discuss their texts in this manner as it allows us to unpack that which many view as empowering and uniting statements, and may perhaps continue oppressive stereotypes and division among those with Black feminist aims.

Attack on the Queer Body

Much of the work in *The Queens of Comedy* is obviously heteronormative.. Most of the women do not perform any material that mentions homosexuality. While Black women are often the central theme of their material, the Black lesbian is mostly ignored. Sommore, however makes incredibly homophobic and bigoted statements in regards to non-heterosexual women. When explaining the five days she spent in jail before the filming of the show, she states:

I never seen so many dykes in my life. Baby, The dykes was on me. Lord there was this one dyke who wouldn’t leave me ‘lone. I said bitch leave me ‘lone...That bitch looked at me and said eatin’ ain’t cheating. And I said ‘well bitch then we gonna be fightin’ cause I ain’t dykin’’. (Sommore, 2001)

Sommore first uses the term “dyke” in a way that both demeans her and places her as the enemy, the object of the joke. Sommore is not practicing feminist modes of humor as she utilizes an opportunity for a laugh by attacking the marginalized Other. Not only does Sommore verbally attack the woman in jail, but threatens violence when she states, “I said well bitch then we gonna be fightin’ cause I ain’t dykin’.” Here, she views the

possibility of a homosexual encounter as means for physical attack—not just in self-defense, but in hate towards another marginalized woman.

While Sommore does not specify the race of the lesbian in her text, it may still offer us a wider lens of the prevalence heterosexism among African Americans, specifically Black women. Lorde (2007) argues:

The Black lesbian has come under increasing attack from both Black men and heterosexual Black women. In the same way that the existence of the self-defined Black woman is no threat to the self-defined Black man, the Black lesbian is an emotional threat only to those Black women whose feelings of kinship and love for other Black women are problematic in some way. For so long, we have been encouraged to view each other with suspicion as internal competitors, or as the visible face of our own self-rejection. (p. 49)

It seems as if Sommore is refusing to accept and learn from the ways in which intersecting oppression can shape, complicate, and inform one's identity. "These subjects' [queers of color] different identity components occupy adjacent spaces and are not comfortably situated in any one discourse of minority subjectivity. These hybridized identificatory positions are always in transit, shuttling between different identity vectors" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 32).

With texts such as these, are the Queens' efforts to find solidarity and common ground among women in vain? It does not seem that the women communicating their experiences as heterosexuals are inherently alienating. However, when bigoted statements such as these are made, it seems as if the Queens are taking a step backwards in the empowerment of women. This begs the question, are the Queens using their comedy to further a feminist political agenda, or are they just in it for the laughs? It is imperative for women comics performing feminist material to take responsibility for their messages. Although taboo subject matter often creates controversy and sparks audience

interest, if female comics are looking to break down hierarchies humor can create, it is imperative to approach comedic performances with openness rather than hateful and divisive language. To break down intersecting oppressions, the Queens must perhaps step outside of their own standpoint in order to incorporate (or at the very least acknowledge) queer women of color. In this way, a Black feminist project may be closer to being achieved. Lorde attributes the inclusion of Black lesbians into all feminist consciousnesses as incredibly valuable. “But most of all, as Black women we have the right and responsibility to recognize each other without fear and to love where we choose” (Lorde, 2007 p. 52).

Chapter Conclusion

It is evident that the Queens’ comedy, while directed towards women, does not necessarily unite them. The material examined in this chapter demonstrates the ways in which humor can divide audiences and create a performative space where the comic may perpetuate hegemonic notions of marginalized groups. Exploration of radical Black feminist voices in comedic performances may perhaps empower audiences to invest in their own subjectivity.

When black women relate to our bodies, our sexuality in ways that place erotic recognition, desire, pleasure, and fulfillment at the center of our efforts to create radical black female subjectivity, we can make new and different representations of ourselves as sexual subjects. To do so, we must be willing to transgress traditional boundaries. We must no longer shy away from the critical project of openly interrogating and exploring representations of black female sexuality as they appear everywhere, especially in popular culture. (hooks, 1997, p. 72)

Movement towards and emphasis of the erotic self rather than a fragmented one, uniting Black women rather than competing with one another, and fighting against homophobia

and heterosexism, are all imperative elements of Black feminist solidarity. Utilizing comedic performances to articulate intersecting oppressions, and unite a multiplicity of audiences can be a risky business (much like any feminist action). However, in order for a Black feminist project to be articulated on the terms of Black women, risks must be taken in solidarity. Elam describes the power performances can hold in uniting audiences. He explains that radical performances can “reflect the changing dynamics of cultural identity within the existent social order, but can make their own claims, structure their own circumstances and raise significant questions about how race operates and how it interacts with issues of gender, sexuality, class and culture” (Elam as cited in Dolan, 2005, p.49).

Even with its drawbacks, it is evident that the Queens are working towards a new method of humor. They demonstrate that women can be funny *together*. The following chapter examines how the Queens utilize humor to communicate experiences of Black American women. Despite the drawbacks of their performances examined in the previous pages, their humorous performances can indeed be a feminist project—one that is grounded in sharing women’s experiences through more reachable modes of communication. Mohanty (2006) discourages feminism in the academy to stand in for all feminist viewpoints. hooks (2000) states that a feminist struggle can take place anytime, anywhere, but that it is imperative that the language of resistance is one of accessibility. hooks encourages, “I emphasize that we need feminist writing that speaks to everyone; that without it feminist education for critical consciousness cannot happen” (p. xiv).

Performances like the *Queens of Comedy* enable women to both find common ground among their experiences and vocalize empowerment in a way that is accessible to

many of those who do not necessarily take part in academic discourse. It is imperative that both scholars and performance artists embrace the potential humor holds for reaching wide audiences. We must critique and understand the delicate role feminist humor can play in breaking down cultural barriers and communicating messages that otherwise may be silenced. Black feminists Barbara and Beverly Smith emphasize this when they explain, “I was not meant to be alone and without you who understand” (Smith and Smith, as cited in Lorde, 2007, p. 153).

CHAPTER 3: PERFORMANCE, HUMOR AND FEMINIST SOLIDARITY

Women's Spaces

Performances by and for women are a rarity. Women's efforts to claim performative places, spaces, and most importantly, audiences with feminist aims remain in the background of mainstream theatre, television and film. If the attempts to perform feminisms are comedic, however, the struggle becomes even greater. This is not a new phenomenon. Women have historically had to fight to find ways to relate to one another through comedic texts. Victorian women utilized what Barreca (1992) calls their own "secret code of irony" to remain discreet, but nonetheless bond in their experiences. Victorian women expressed dissatisfaction with daily life, "disguised in such a way that it [humor] acts as a sort of secret code that other women can understand but so that it remains hidden from men" (Barreca, 1992, p. 15). Mae West, while often deemed as a sex object, wrote her own plays in which she played mother hen to her group of gay male friends. She utilized camp humor and blessed theatres with one of the first portrayals of gay men and their "fag hags." In 1980, New York City's WOW Café opened. This theatre space offers accessible performances and performance spaces for queer women. Comedians and performance artists such as Carmelita Tropicana, Margo Gomez, and Terry Galloway started their careers at WOW. The café continues to thrive; their website boldly states: "WOW Café Theatre: 28 Years of Vulva Rockin' Theatre!"

These examples demonstrate the legacy women in comedy leave for each other. The roads paved by past performers allow women to continue to explore and push the boundaries of rhetorical humor. In the opening credits of *The Queens of Comedy*, the

women are filmed driving into Memphis city limits in a convertible. A voice over of Monique states, “Tonight, we’re makin’ history. This is the first time four women have been on stage at one time makin’ a movie” (Mo’Nique, 2001). While Monique’s statement may be an exaggeration, she does point out both the importance and the rarity of women performing together—specifically, Black women for Black audiences. Claiming the importance of their performances indicate that the Queens are invested in their collective work. In doing so, the comedians celebrate and invoke the film’s tagline: “Oh Yes, It’s Ladies Night.”

“Women’s humor, however, is not only about telling jokes. It’s about telling stories and about retelling stories that might have once been painful but can be redeemed through humor (Barreca, 1996, p. 5). The redemptive power of humorous forms of communication can account for the ways in which women may both survive and thrive together. This chapter seeks to examine the better half of the Queens’ performances. Indeed, there is something special regarding four women of color creating comedic performances collectively. Thus, looking at how the Queens use humor to bond women is an imperative task. Finding humor that incorporates both Black and feminist thought is key to expanding research regarding women in humor.

The following textual analysis will examine the ways in which the Queens may articulate Black feminist thought and how their attempts in doing so raise feminists’ consciousnesses through humor. I argue that the Queens inform feminist thought and comedic strategies by rebelling in their content, rejecting traditional joke form, and realigning women. Therefore, I will introduce three instances in which the Queens utilize feminist humor and examine how the Queens rebel, reject, and realign women. The texts

examined in this chapter are very telling of not only the Queens' sense of humor, but also their goals in the creation of the film. *The Queens of Comedy* as a spin off on *The Kings of Comedy* allowed the women to not only take the stage for themselves, but enable the women in the audience to feel included in their objectives as well. While the women do not create a new genre of performance, their standup style does in fact represent the new territory of humor feminist performers can embrace.

The Queens

SISTER SOLIDARITY: LAURA HAYES'S FEMINIST HUMOR

Three specific instances in the film seem to capture the mood of the film as a celebration of women and their collective experiences. To begin, the opening of the film depicts M.C. Laura Hayes warming up the crowd. 58 year-old Hayes seems to be the mother of the show; she introduces each comedian, and also contributes her own personal narratives. During her first act, Hayes goes through her different relationships with family members (e.g. grandchildren, and children), but the climax of her monologue explains the relationships she has with her six other sisters: one grounded in solidarity.

"He [my dad] taught us to stick together too...you marry one of us, you marry all of us" (Hayes, 2001). She then describes the consequences of a brother-in-law hurting one of the sisters in the family:

Moms dialed one number all our phones rang. We jumped in the car we rollin', we slappin' fives over the seat...get to the house, screech up real fast, walk in the door, that nigga just about to hit my sister we like aw no not tonight muthafucka...We ain't play that. No baby I got no shame in my game. (Hayes, 2001)

After this segment the crowd becomes uproarious as Hayes takes off her wig and lifts up her arms, showing an aggressive, but light-hearted tone. This segment was Hayes's most successful with the audience, receiving the most laughter of her set and concluding her opening act.

THAT'S RIGHT: ADELE GIVENS'S MESSAGE TO WOMEN

Next, Adele Givens, best known for her work with Tracy Ullman, takes the stage with an energy that seems to deeply affect the audience. She is dressed in a leopard-print dress, tall high-heeled shoes and even taller hair. With a large smile, she seems very comfortable and excited to be on stage. Immediately, she opens the set with a message to her audience by proclaiming the importance of women accepting their bodies and loving themselves. She yells:

We been trippin' 'bout flaws. A flaw ain't shit but a unique identifying mark. Everybody got a flaw; if you got a big belly, rub that motherfucker. Rub it. Ladies let me tell you something tonight. I don't care what's wrong with you, how fucked up you think you are, somebody love your ass. So if you're bucked tooth, relax. Chill out Bucky Baby you gonna be alright, cause I bet there's a man in the house right now who don't want nothing less than a bitch who can bite an apple through a picket fence I swear to god. That's right. I want you to quit disrespecting yourself. Know that you are beautiful. Understand that. (Givens, 2001)

She goes on to encourage women to disregard dominant media standards of "beauty."

Givens explains that celebrities are around to entertain us; "real" women aren't made the same way celebrities are. She states:

You know they ain't made outta your shit, cause you read about them goin' to the hospital for exhaustion or dehydration. Now, what bitch you know is so tired she gotta go to the hospital? I know some women who got two jobs, six kids, no man. The bitch got shit to do. You hear me? She ain't goin' to no hospital. Who gonna take care them badass kids? In the real world, when you're exhausted you take a fuckin' nap don'tcha? (Givens, 2001)

The rest of Givens's performance centers around ideas such as these, pointing out the ridiculous lengths women may go to in order to feel adequate. Issues of class, race, and gender permeate her performance as she ridicules the unrealistic expectations Western culture often places on women, and all the while encourages audience members to embrace their flaws.

IT'S A NEW TIME: MO'NIQUE

Mo'Nique closes the show and certainly acts as the finale to the film. Perhaps the most famous of all the actresses, Mo'Nique's fan base seemed to thoroughly enjoy her presence on stage. She demands applause from the audience and immediately changes the tone that previous performers set. Mo'Nique takes a much different approach than Givens for the beginning of her set. She does not set the tone of her performance by bringing Black women in the audience together, but rather, dividing them. She immediately commands the overweight women in the audience to stand up and applaud both Mo'Nique, as well as themselves.

All you fat bitches...stand up and take a muthafuckin' bow. Big girl you better represent. I love you babygirl you handle your shit. Fuck you anorexic skinny bitches...You all look good from the top of your head from the bottom of your feet. Skinny women are evil and they need to be destroyed. It's a new time...I got news for you...it's a new motherfuckin' day. And once you go fat you never go back. Handle your shit big people. (Mo'Nique, 2001)

This performance, although biting, was nonetheless lighthearted. Mo'Nique laughs in a very jolly way between lines of the shocking monologue; she even interrupts with asides, speaking to specific thin women in the front row saying "Don't worry, I love you baby" (Mo'Nique, 2001). With this, she very quickly turns her statements around.

Reuniting the women in the audience, but specifying women of color. After the crowd's laughter from the lines transcribed above subsides, she calmly brings the tone down stating: "I don't give a fuck what size we are...just bein' a sister. We are some special motherfuckers. Every woman in here is so pretty...black women we have a motto about life. Black women...we don't give a fuck about shit" (Mo'Nique, 2001).

The Queens as Rebels

"There is a rebel in me...It is that part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed. At the least hint of limitations on my time or space by others, it kicks out with both feet. Bolts."—Gloria Anzaldua, 2007

With a better understanding of the state of humor as a subversive tool to challenge performance territories, we are more equipped to examine the Queens' rhetoric. First, the Queens indicate a new method of feminist humor by rebelling against typical content of standup comedy. As explained in chapter one, much of humor research that includes feminist comedians does not account for minority women. The Queens rebel by allowing their material to articulate oppressions through humor. "Breaking silence enables individual African American women to reclaim humanity in a system that gains part of its strength by objectifying Black women" (Collins, 1998, p. 47). The women performing in the film take on a unique role: they address issues of class and race as well as gender. Too often, women comedians either ignore the intersections of oppression many women experience, or come from a standpoint where they do not have the perspective of minority women. Although comedians such as Sarah Silverman perform racism in what is supposed a satirical tone, that strategy may indeed isolate women of different ethnic groups. Beyond the text examined for the purposes of this paper, the comedians weave

together issues marginalized groups often experience. Utilizing their status as performers as well as women of color, the Queens create narratives that equalize their audiences. Placing their experiences in the public, performative realm is thus a way to create oppositional knowledge. The perspective the women perform (working class, not white, etc.) puts them in a position to break down hierarchies and reclaim performative space all the while effectively performing feminist humor.

As Mo’Nique stated in the beginning of the film, a large venue with four women of color doing standup could perhaps be considered an historical event. The entire concept of the film may be a rebellion, one in which women are not only demonstrating their abilities as comedians, but that the subject matter of their performances (i.e. women’s experiences) is a necessary and effective topic of standup comedy. Each woman rebels simply by voicing her experiences that have historically been silenced or are the object of ridicule. For example, comedy troupes such as the Blue Collar Comics situate women as objects of ridicule. The infamous “Get ‘er done,” a slogan by Larry the Cable Guy of the Blue Collar Comics, exemplifies the opportunities male actors take to create a hierarchy through comedic performances. The Cable Guy bellows this phrase after many of his jokes, usually referring to sex with women or putting them “in their place.” However, the Queens’ rebellious acts place both the audience and performer as subjects and objects of humor. Each performer enacts a particular strategy to accomplish this complex positioning.

First, Laura Hayes’s monologue speaks of protecting her sister from an abusive husband. While this does not necessarily seem like an opportunity for comedic performances, Hayes breaks the silence often associated with domestic violence.

Interestingly, Hayes does not attack men during her monologue about protecting her sister, but rather announces the joy her family takes in sticking together. When she states, “Moms dialed one number all our phones rang. We jumped in the car we rollin’, we slappin’ fives over the seat” (Hayes, 2001), Hayes emphasizes the solidarity among the women in her family. Bryant-Davis (2005) explains that while coping mechanisms for domestic violence are wide and varied in American culture, African Americans frequently rely on kinship and social support. Resilience, then, comes from an articulation and pride in one’s family bond.

When she describes she and her sisters slapping high-fives to each other in the car, she is reclaiming a situation that normally places women in a victimizing role. Survivors of domestic violence do not typically find voices in the realm of standup comedy, but Hayes rebels by almost ignoring the male abuser all together in her monologue, and focuses on the success her sisters have in saving each other. Claiming these instances as one for public discussion and comedic performance is an act of rebelling as well. Gracia (2004) claims that the small number of reported incidences of domestic violence in American homes make up a minute or “iceburg” portion of abuse that exists. The fact that Hayes brings this instance into public performance indicates that she does not speak of her sister as someone who is helpless to abuse. Her vocabulary indicates both a sense of survival and subjectivity for those who are usually silenced objects of abuse. By stating, “I got no shame in my game” (Hayes, 2001), she is not making light of her sister being abused; she is celebrating the bonding ritual of familial protection.

Next, Adele Givens also take part in the rebel yell of the film. Similarly to Hayes,

Givens gives subjectivity to those who are often the object of the joke. “We been trippin’ ‘bout flaws” (Givens, 2001): she implies that audience members (specifically women) have fallen under false assumptions of what one *should* be. However, her performance redirects audience members toward rebelling against dominant standards of beauty. Rather than pointing out one’s flaws in order to ridicule, she exaggerates women’s physical appearance that others would find attractive. “I bet there’s a man in the house right now who don’t want nothing less than a bitch who can bite an apple through a picket fence I swear to god” (Givens, 2001). This specific line creates a grotesque image of a woman with a very large gap between her front teeth that, while comical, is not mocked. It is embraced—a feature to be celebrated.

Additionally, her monologue regarding celebrities going to the hospital for exhaustion brings issues of class to the forefront of her performance. “I know some women who got two jobs, six kids, no man. The bitch got shit to do. You hear me? She ain’t goin’ to no hospital” (Givens, 2001). As Gillooly (1991) explains, women’s humor may describe intercategorical experiences, subverting dominant cultural discourse rather than complying with it. Further, Davis (1977) explains that the oppression of Black women is inherently connected to capitalism. Describing intersections of oppression in a comedic fashion shines light on the power of feminist humor. Through comedy, Givens is able to voice feminist concerns without shutting unsympathetic audiences out. The performance utilizes vernacular rhetoric to comfort those audiences who have been through similar experiences and communicate to those who would be ignorant or insensitive to marginalized women’s struggles. Thus, Givens tethers race and class oppression together in her performance, both rebelling against silence and turning

unauthorized discourse in patriarchal circles to celebrated stories of survival.

Mo'Nique's performance also represents a rebellious act. She opens her set by exclaiming, "All you fat bitches...stand up and take a muthafuckin' bow" (Monique, 2001). Reclaiming the fat body by encouraging large women to demand respect is certainly a counter-attack on dominant standards on the body. Further, Monique asks the women to take a bow for no one but themselves. Thus, the women's bodies are not on display for a male gaze, but rather are encouraged to appreciate their individual selves. The act of bowing can be seen as a chance for each woman to revel in the reclamation of her body. Collins (2005) explains that the Black female body is often objectified and hypersexualized. Specifically, popular images of larger buttocks or breasts fragment the Black body and prevent Black women from finding their individual subjectivity. Mo'Nique's request does not overtly sexualize the fat body, but demands that it be seen, rather than shunned or sexualized.

Although she seemingly divides women (fat vs. thin), she may, in fact, unite them. Statements such as "Skinny women are evil and they need to be destroyed" (Mo'Nique, 2001), may seem violent and divisive, but the audience seemed to understand the playfulness in Mo'Nique's tone. Clips of thin women in the audience laughing along with more extreme lines such as the one described above affirms that her subversive use of humor is embraced. "top-down power relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality permeate individual consciousness and tell African Americans how they should think about their own bodies. Moreover, such power relations invade the body because they also instruct Black people how they should *feel* within their own bodies" (Collins, 2005, p. 282). Mo'Nique utilizes her content to rebel against masculine modes of humor that

objectify or ignore the female experience all together. She encourages Black women to feel positive about their bodies, moving away from the framework of dominant views of Black women.

The Queens' Rejection of Freud

If one can possibly use the orgasm as an analogy, the male comedy is always kind of going towards an end, there's a punch line, and you laugh, and there's release. With female comedy, it's mostly circular, and character-based, and there's a laugh here and a laugh here, and then a big laugh. Because laughing is like orgasming; it's the same sort of set of muscles you're using. –Emma Thompson, 2006

Emma Thompson's thoughts on women in humor, while essentialist in nature, reflect one of the ways in which feminist humor may move away from masculine joke telling. As explained in chapter one, the traditional joke form is centered on the punch line. Thus, the "set up" becomes subsidiary to the momentary release of laughter. Freud expands upon this idea by explaining that a comic's success is dependent upon an "economy of release." Mental pleasure of the listener (voyeur) is wrapped up in the *amount* of physical pleasure (laughter). He states, "The pleasure in jokes has seemed to us to arise from an economy in expenditure...For the euphoria which we endeavor to reach by these means is nothing other than the mood of a period of life in which we were accustomed to deal with our psychical work in general with a small expenditure of energy" (Freud, 1960 p. 293). For Freud, we move towards comedy solely to obtain pleasurable release. The comic is no longer useful to the audience when the economy of release has run its course. Laughter is thus reduced to a physical act; it is one in which achieving pleasure is emphasized on an individual level, rather than a method of community building.

However, Freud's joke triangle reveals the ways in which the Queens reject masculine joke telling. The triangle consists of: 1.) Joke-teller, 2.) Object of the joke, and 3.) Listener. Joke telling methods that utilize this model not only rely on a quick release of pleasure, but also are inherently aggressive in that the pleasure derives from attacking the Object.

It is evident that the Queens' style of comedy rejects traditional forms of joke telling. Beyond subject matter, the Queens rebel formally against dominant comic forms. Caliskan (1995) asserts that dominant ideas of what a comical persona is are as follows: "To be funny is to be assertive, aggressive, and forceful; that is, everything a 'good girl' is not supposed to be" (p. 4). However, she goes on to explain that many women utilize humor to deal with oppression, but deliver jokes in a manner that move "beyond the anger and resentment caused by this oppression" (p. 7). The Queens often utilize feminist humor by positing themselves as storyteller rather than aggressor in their performative realm.

In this sense, the Queens often lack a specific punch line in their narratives. Their stories are rather based upon situations and characters. Hayes's time on stage seems to avoid the traditional joke almost completely. Rather, she utilizes story telling with humorous elements. "We jumped in the car we rollin', we slappin' fives over the seat, get to the house, screech up real fast, walk in the door, that nigga just about to hit my sister we like aw no not tonight muthafucka" (Hayes, 2001). This particular section gives the audience a linear account of the instance in which Hayes and her sisters protected their sister from an abusive husband. Each sentence received laughter from the audience, and while the laughter seemed to build as the story went on, it was not necessarily due to a

punch line. The elements of humor in the narrative enhanced the story rather than the jokes being goal of Hayes's performance.

While the object of her narrative could be considered her sister's abuser, Hayes is still breaking the joke triangle by reversing male-voyeur and female-object. Hayes, in fact, turns an incredibly serious situation: one in which women are often the victims, to a comical one. "Moms dialed one number all our phones rang" (Hayes, 2001). It is unexpected that women would band together to physically attack an abuser and it is the unexpected situation that ultimately empowers as well as gets the laugh.

Adele Givens's message to her audience does not use a linear narrative like Hayes. It is a longer monologue rather than a series of jokes. Rather than attacking any particular person or thing, Givens simply reaches out to women when she speaks about embracing one's flaws. "Everybody got a flaw; if you got a big belly, rub that motherfucker. Rub it... Ladies let me tell you something tonight. I don't care what's wrong with you how fucked up you think you are somebody love your ass" (Givens, 2001). There is thus no object of the joke. The humor comes from common experiences. When she states, "So if you're bucked tooth relax. Chill out Bucky Baby you gonna be alright" (Givens, 2001), Givens exaggerates the way women see themselves in order to articulate the ridiculousness of Western standards of beauty. Without joke set-up or a specific person of whom to make fun, Givens still communicates her message to the audience in a comical way.

Interestingly enough, these performances (at least according to the audience's reaction) do not lack humorous elements. There are many opportunities for physical relief of laughter, and the audience members in the theatre certainly take advantage of

them. However, it is the way in which this laughter is brought about that demonstrates a rejection of Freud's theories regarding momentary release. In the realms of psychoanalysis, the comic is simply a facilitator of physical laughter—one whose success is based on both the volume and amount of people responding to the jokes. The Queens, however, utilize their styles of humor to communicate personal messages. The laughter therefore is a method of communication and community building. This conclusion will be further developed in the next section of this chapter.

Each text examined in this chapter does not follow traditional joke format. There is little set up, and not a large release at the end. It is the narration that becomes subversive, or an opportunity for humor to allow women in the audience to partake in dialogue. If an audience finds the narration aligns similarly with their own experiences, the story will be persuasive. Narration holds particular rhetorical merit when the teller and those listening to the story find common ground and communal identity among the words or symbols being used to communicate. "Stories are meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them to establish ways of living in common, in communities in which there is sanction for the story that constitutes one's life" (Fisher, 1984, p. 1).

The laughter becomes a response to the performers, affirming that the experiences of which the Queens speak are relatable. Without a specific punch line or "butt" of the joke, the women utilize their personal experiences to communicate a common ground with their audiences. Rather than the momentary release in Freudian form, and the distinct subject/object positioning so common in Western, masculine joke telling, the Queens act as feminist performers and effectively utilize feminist styles of humor.

Realigning Women Through Humor

“Yet women-identified women—those who sought their own destinies and attempted to execute them in the absence of male support—have been around in all of our communities for a long time” –Audre Lorde, 2007

Of all aspects of the Queens’ use of comedy, the realignment of women seems to be the most significant of their project. By not necessarily *attacking* dominant cultural restraints, but rather bonding over personal experiences, the women in *The Queens of Comedy* unite the audience on their terms. The previous chapter outlined divisive performances on the part of the Queens, the texts to be examined are reflective of much of the film. While the Queens are at times flawed in their performance efforts, the majority of their material does encourage coalition building among Black women. The narratives examined in this chapter demonstrate the rhetorical power of comedic feminist performances through the articulation of intersecting oppressions and common experiences. “The most important attribute of humor from a feminist perspective, however, may be its ability to challenge dominant ideological discourse and by association, the power structure that discourse supports without openly confronting them” (Gillooly, 1991 p. 473). They are coalition building around shared narratives rather than a shared enemy. “Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see” (hooks, 1992, p. 117). The Queens are creating a space in which their humor allows for audiences to see through the gaze of oppressed voices, bond over similarities, and come to an understanding of difference.

In this section, I will be examining the ways in which Laura Hayes, Adele Givens, and Mo’Nique seek to unite women through their performances. Miller and Taylor state

that performances of women's experiences create "the story of resistance to the disembodied, traditionally masculine "universal subject" whose implicit denial of skin color, gender, sexual orientation (other than heterosexual), and economic disparity constrained many women as 'others' with no voices or physicality" (2003, p. 4). The comics utilize experiences of women to communicate experiences of marginalized groups and create a sense of cohesion among audience members.

Hayes's subject matter allows for realigning among women by explaining that women can combat oppressive regimes such as domestic violence together. She states that protecting other women should be a communal act, one in which women can and should look out for each other's safety. She takes pride in the act when stating "We ain't play that. No baby I got no shame in my game" (Hayes, 2001). Collins explains that the rhetoric of victimization typically surrounds narratives of abuse. "women are forced to 'assume the position' of powerless victim, one who has no control over what is happening to her body...silence erases evidence of the crime" (2005, p. 28). When Hayes vocalizes the narrative, she empowers women. In addition, she unites them by emphasizing that survival can and should be a bonding ritual. Collins (2000) states "African American women have been neither passive victims of nor willing accomplices to their own domination" (p. 184). Hayes' experiences (whether they be truly factual or exaggerated for performance) allow her to reclaim the stage as a space for women to share and unite under an understanding of solidarity.

Additionally, this coalition building is exemplified effectively by Adele Givens's performance. When speaking of the importance of women embracing their bodies, she emphasizes community when stating, "We been trippin' 'bout flaws. A flaw ain't shit but

a unique identifying mark. Everybody got a flaw” (Givens, 2001). She explains that not only is every human physically different, but that difference should be celebrated. She indicates that by “trippin” women have been fooled into thinking that their differences cannot be desirable. Encouraging women to celebrate their physical bodies gives them agency. “When black women relate to our bodies, our sexuality in ways that place erotic recognition, desire, pleasure and fulfillment at the center of our efforts to create radical black female subjectivity, we can make new and different representations of ourselves as sexual objects” (hooks, 1992, p. 76).

Additionally, Given’s use of the word “we” demonstrates an investment of creating cohesion between herself and her audience. The only time she detaches herself from her listener is when she is instructing them to take control of their self-esteem. “I want you to quit disrespecting yourself...Know that you are beautiful. Understand that” (Givens, 2001). Her commands are positive ones and intended to align women and help them understand that everyone is flawed. Her comical strategy, even through profane language and blunt, seems to be that of love. She demands women let go of unrealistic expectations and thus turns her comedic performance into a bonding ritual—a communal sacrifice of that which has historically oppressed women.

Mo’Nique’s comedy is also indicative of her desire to unite women. “I don’t give a fuck what size we are, just bein’ a sister. We are some special” (Mo’Nique, 2001). This particular statement allows Mo’Nique to break out of her comedic persona (one in which women who are not fat are evil) and evoke a sense of pride among women of color in the audience. Like Givens, Mo’Nique’s use of the word “we” creates a common ground between communicator and listeners. After the particular statement was uttered, the entire

audience (both men and women) applauded with great enthusiasm. Stating, “I got news for you...it’s a new motherfuckin’ day,” indicates that Mo’Nique is encouraging marginalized voices to reject dominant views of Black American women. As hooks (2000) explains, “To experience solidarity, we must have a community of shared interests, shared beliefs, and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood” (p. 67). Rather than take an entire act to divide and conquer by acting as an aggressor, Mo’Nique and the rest of the Queens perform humor to empower.

Chapter Conclusion

The Queens utilize their time on stage to create both oppositional knowledge as well as cohesion among Black women audiences. While much of their material does not specifically address a racialized experience, it seems as if the Queens assume a Black audience and thus navigate womanhood inside the frame of Blackness. This, interestingly enough, allows for feminist rhetoric to begin from a place that includes race. Thus, the rhetors assume broader experiences of oppression in American culture. Humor as a method to communicate the experiences of intersecting marginalization allows feminist aims to shine through in accessible ways to a wide variety of audiences. James (2000) explains that since the 1970s, consciousness raising among Black women has suffered and since the peak of second wave feminism, “intersecting race, gender, sexuality and class—with more than rhetoric, that is, in viable political practices that organizes in non-elite communities became a major challenge for feminists” (p. 243). The Queens offer methods for articulating intersecting oppressions through humor, thus opening new opportunities for Black feminist thought to emerge and thrive.

CHAPTER 4: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Understanding a comedic act is tricky business. It is often difficult to interpret the comedian's intentions as well as audience perceptions. Regardless of the comic's aims, a political project is often unavoidable. The comedian is the rhetor and has the potential to deeply affect her audience. For the Queens of Comedy, the stage acts as a counterpublic space where they may not only express themselves through performance, but also reach out to marginalized audience members. Their performances demonstrate the ways in which humor holds concrete political dimensions. Laughter thus becomes a symbol consciousness raising; audiences can be made aware of their relations to others through comedy.

Chapter one explored the state of humor in rhetorical studies. I sought to integrate Black feminist thought into the rhetoric of feminist humor. In doing so, we may become more equipped to understand the ways in which comedy can inform feminist aims and articulate the intersections of women's standpoints in accessible forums. I examined dimensions of Black feminisms, humor in communication, and current research regarding women and humor. With this research, I explored what a feminist humor that includes multiple oppressions and standpoints of women. Humor that becomes open to discussions of race, class, sexuality, gender etc. from the standpoint of marginalized peoples breaks down aggressive dimensions of comedy and builds communities.

Chapter two examined the ways in which the Queens' humor did not communicate feminist aims. This chapter explored how the Sommore and Mo'Nique demonstrated anti-feminist performances in three ways: objectifying Black female body,

encouraging dependence on Black men, and attacking those with queer identities. Recognizing the drawbacks of this rhetorical act is an important part of understanding how humor can be a successful or harmful mode of Black feminist discourse. To acknowledge that women, even those who often communicate messages of unity, can fall within the trap of misogynist and homophobic rhetoric, is an important aspect of moving towards new modes of feminist humors. “The results of woman-hating in the Black community are tragedies which diminish all Black people. These acts must be seen in the context of a systematic devaluation of Black women with in this society...This abuse is no longer acceptable to Black women in the name of solidarity, nor of Black liberation” (Lorde, 2007, p. 65). Critiquing the Queens harmful rhetoric may assist those wishing to explore how humor can be utilized to convey messages of solidarity for women of color.

Chapter three applied the aspects of feminist humor I explored in chapter one. I analyzed the Queens’ performances and how they rejected the aggressive nature of joke-telling, rebelled in their subject matter, and realigned women. This chapter demonstrated how the female comic can move away from being an objectified Other and move towards the position of subject—in turn, facilitating community building among audiences. When taking the performances examined in chapter two into consideration with those empowering messages the Queens do give in chapter three, it is evident that the Queens’ performances are flawed. While the unifying messages discussed in chapter three are mainly directed at Black heterosexual women, the Queens do demonstrate the ways that women can use humor to empower themselves as performers, and empower audience members as well. Considering the Queens explore aspects of life specific to women, and often specific to Black American women, they create a space in which their experiences

are not only heard, but valued. Women can and should utilize this style of performance, but must be wary of exclusion that could very well perpetuate the style of humor against which they rebel.

Although the audience members in the live theatre were deeply receptive of the performers, reviews of the film suggested otherwise. Unlike the *Kings of Comedy*, critics often found the show offensive and rather unfunny. Like many other critics, Troy Patterson of *Entertainment Weekly* called the women vulgar and ineffective as comedians dubbing them “Ladies Worst” (Patterson, 2001). Kaufer (1977) encourages those delivering humorous messages to keep incompatible audiences at bay. However, marketing strategies and critics hold great power in how films will be perceived and for what audiences they are “appropriate.” It seems that reviews of the Queens wished to guide the performances in the direction of obscene or sub-par compared to *The Original Kings of Comedy*. Movie critic Christopher Null said of the film, “alongside those Original Kings of Comedy stand their Queens. While you'll have to decide if they're really royalty [there is] not much more to report about this stand-up show, but when there's nothing under the hood, there's nothing to say” (Null, 2001). This review (like many others) refused to view the Queens as autonomous performers. Null goes so far as to say that the women are the objects of their male counter-parts, calling the women “*their* Queens.” Reception of the film disparages the Queens’ very important political project that allows Black women to unite under common (and commonly silenced) experiences. The reviews reaffirm racism and hostility toward women among white, male audiences, but nonetheless should not discourage those participating performative acts to avoid important political projects.

If movie critics (who are predominantly white males) refuse to appease and embrace the women's use of humor as a political project, how may Black feminist discourses reach wider audiences and incite social change beyond already sympathizing audiences? Collins explains, "African American women not only have developed distinctive interpretations of black women's oppression, but have done so by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge itself" (2000, p. 183). As a consciousness-raising (or consciousness voicing) tool that incorporates humor and vernacular discourse, the Queens do indeed communicate their experiences to groups that are already understanding of their comedic messages. Media reviews are perhaps diverting out-groups from opening their world-view. Negative reviews may prevent a broad audience to embrace the Queens' (as well as a Black feminist) project. While their reviews may imply an unwillingness to embrace feminist forms of humor, perhaps this is proof performances such as the Queens' must continue their efforts to expose non-marginalized audiences to their standpoints. The simultaneity of division and community building in consciousness raising efforts is often inevitable. However, spaces where marginalized voices can be heard are imperative to social change, regardless of mainstream acceptance.

Current research regarding women in humor reveals a need for comedy to be integrated into feminist rhetoric. It is understood that humor on women's terms allows for the experiences of oppression to be explained in accessible ways. What research is currently lacking, however is the importance of integrating the perspectives of marginalized women. Comedy can indeed act as a rhetorical intervention that allows Black women to claim agency. Humor that embraces racialized and gendered

experiences gives the performer and audience opportunities to find new ways to articulate and combat intersecting oppressions specific to women of color.

Adele Givens explained during her time on stage with *The Queens of Comedy*, “I use ya’ll as therapists...I talk to ya’ll ‘cause I know ya’ll can relate to the shit I’m talkin’ about’ (Givens, 2001). It is difficult to locate the Queens’ exact intentions in regards to their comedic performances, but it is indeed evident that they are utilizing feminist humor to empower the women in their live audience as well as those who view the film. By bringing together audiences that are so often marginalized in Western discourse, the women act as the voices of oppositional knowledge, bringing together women through shared experiences and rejection of dominant discourses. The stories we tell hold immense power; humorous ones are often a way to unite an otherwise unlikely diverse gathering of people. The Queens exemplify modes of feminist discourse that may perhaps encourage women to come together through new performative territory—specifically one that embraces humor as an effective rhetorical strategy. In doing so, they reveal the power both our stories and laughter hold for strategies that create social change and equality.

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